

Article

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“EXPRESSION” AND “EXPRESSIVE” IN RELIGIOUS TALK FOR THE ARTS

John KING-FARLOW

RÉSUMÉ. — Les écoles profanes d'expressionnistes et de formalistes en esthétique se voient comparées à deux voies religieuses différentes pour voir Dieu, la beauté et la créativité. La première voie inclut une perspective temporelle: le temps intervient entre la conception et l'intention à la création de ce qui va exister en Dieu ou Son monde. La seconde, sans perspective temporelle, concerne davantage la diffusion atemporelle d'une propriété hautement abstraite, la beauté, dans la connaissance de Dieu. — Tormey et Shiner, dans deux des attaques séculières les mieux connues sur l'expressionnisme, sont présentés comme dépendant de formes d'un naturalisme à la recherche d'arguments. Les manières religieuses d'interpréter des termes comme "expressif", "expression" et "miracle" peuvent être libérantes pour des philosophes de différentes sortes.

SUMMARY. — Secular Schools of Expressionists and Formalists in aesthetics are compared to two religious ways of viewing God, Beauty and Creativity. The first religious way involves a temporal perspective: time moves from conception and intention to the creation of what will exist in God or His world. The second, timeless perspective concerns more the atemporal spread of a highly abstract property, Beauty, in God's Knowledge. — Tormey and Shiner, in two of the best known secular attacks on Expressionism, are shown to depend on question-begging forms of Naturalism for arguments. Religious ways of interpreting terms like "expressive", "expression" and "miracle" can be liberating for philosophers of very varied kinds.

IN THE FIRST two parts of this essay I shall be concerned to relate the so-called *Expressionist and Formalist theories of artistic creation* to more open-minded attempts at religious understanding of the arts and Beauty itself. It becomes clearer how attacks on Expressionism sometimes have to beg metaphysical questions. In the final third the idea of *the expressive* is explored for some light it throws on religion and aesthetics.

At the end of his influential work on artistic experience, *The Concept of Expression*, Alan Tormey speaks of

The prevalent assumption that a reference to expression in art is either (a) a reference to something lying behind or beyond the work — a thought, mood or attitude to which the work stands [contingently] in some external relation — or (b) a reference to something immediately presented to perception as an aesthetic “surface”¹.

Tormey’s first alternative is widely associated with Romantic and Later Expressionism in writers like Collingwood, Dewey, Langer and Ducasse. The second alternative is more frequently connected with the term “Formalism”: it is used in varied ways, but often in connection with ideas about art in Kant, Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg.

Hostility between two such Schools in philosophy of art, it may be felt, will tend to degenerate into mere ugliness or neat truisms. Yet the contrast between Expressionists’ stress on feeling and intention and Formalists’ focus on special properties can be made more liberating. The secular contrast may trustfully be set beside a complementary pair of ways in which several kinds of religious believers may cooperate in bringing fruitfully together such central concepts as those of God, (or Ultimate Reality), Beauty, Creating and Art. I shall approach this religious coupling mainly as a proposal in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. But there are brief indications of how those with different credal roots might make use of the double perspective.

PART ONE

(A) *Some Dichotomies in Religion and Aesthetics*

Many a theist depends for his conceptions of God both on the relatively temporal descriptions offered by the Bible, and on the relatively timeless accounts of the Supreme Being which appear in much of his theology and accounts of mystical experience. Drawing comprehensively on the historical narrative of the same Old Testament, a Christian, Jew or Muslim may feel similarly contrasting sources of inspiration. Brahman, the Ultimate Reality of Hindus, is timeless and impersonal, yet “created” and “reincarnated”; temporally wandering spirits may eventually fuse with It through self-perfection. A person may arrive at a point of being finally freed from change and suffering. But the immutable Brahman is said to be *ever identical* with the innermost “soul” or Atman of all the continuing finite minds. And some Schools of Buddhism could be argued to hold partly similar views of individuals’ sufferings in time before they reach the timeless emptiness of Nirvana.

After dwelling on such temporal and timeless forms of religious ideas, one may next turn to cases of men who, in discussing Beauty in the arts, always or very often, prefer to talk temporally of a person or a group: their intentions or creative impulses

1. Alan TORMEY, *The Concept of Expression*, a study in philosophical psychology and aesthetics, [Princeton], Princeton U.P., 1971, 164 p.

led to a later artistic result. What had been felt or designed came (through skills) to be implanted in a communal space and to make that space especially attractive or moving to others. Second, one focusses upon those who always or very often prefer talk of Beauty and the arts to center upon some revered, simple, almost undefinable property.

In Plato’s *Republic*, for example, the earlier books deal greatly with what to learn about proper (“mimetic”) representation of the gods from the works of Homer and others. Plato appears to welcome the virtuous poet’s or musician’s beautiful (*kalos*) result of skilfully and piously imitating the highest qualities of the gods or any kinds of excellence as they really are. The right kind of temporal, creative activity has a place in Ideal state. By the middle of the *Republic*’s Tenth book, however, most human art is rejected as an illusion or as a vicious analogue of illusion. Artistic activity produces mere imitations of imitations. Abstract entities like Forms are beautiful (*kala*) because they share *in* something in which Beauty also must share: they are necessarily connected in ontological status and dignity as members of the set of awesome Forms. But the paradigm of what is truly beautiful is simply Beauty (*To Kalon*) itself. Beauty belongs very near the apex of the entire hierarchy of Forms, being effable in still higher terms like “Being-beyond-Forms”, “Goodness Itself” etc. But *To Kalon* is largely to be understood just as what is or sustains one of the highest and purest of ultimate properties. Beauty as indicated by the primary sense of “kalon” in *To Kalon* arises from no divisibility or process. It is beyond time.

A neo-Platonist and early Christian like the Pseudo-Dionysius tries to disclose God as “the super-essential Essence” and “the super-essential Beautiful”. He approaches beauty as one of God’s highest properties. He even speaks of the God as Beauty². For the still earlier and more Platonic Saint Augustine there is a similar placing of Beauty among the supreme excellences or sources of excellence in God: the contemplation comes at the *end* of the soul’s ascent. He even calls God in terms of identity “O Thou Beauty...”³. For many teachers of early Christianity, Beauty becomes almost what the axiomatic thinker would call a *primitive* notion — like the most *basic* ideas of Euclid’s geometry. With St. Thomas Aquinas’ aesthetic thinking we find dialectical considerations of how like and yet how unlike Beauty and Goodness are; how close and yet how very irreducible the aesthetic appreciation of experience is from the apprehension of Beauty⁴. Matters are not so different in a secular circle near Queen Victoria’s death. G.E. Moore argues tirelessly, for example, in his artistically influential *Principia Ethica* of 1903 that only goodness itself is simple and analysable, but that Beauty comes quite close to being so: hence Beauty must be one of the very few intrinsic goods of Ideal Utilitarianism⁵. Roger Fry’s more popular expression of some Moorean teachings helps to make Clive Bell’s ideal of artistic excellence, Significant Form, supremely important. Bell’s *Art* of 1920 shared many modern artists’ faith in making the essence of Art a special property, or set of properties — with a lofty, abstract

2. Cf. PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *On the Divine Names*, 2, 3, 13, etc.

3. Cf. ST-AUGUSTINE, *De Trinitate*, 9, 11, 12.

4. Cf. ST-THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, 5, 4 and 1; Ia, 39, 8.

5. G.E. MOORE, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge, U.P., 1903, pp. 101–105.

flavour imparted by their ways of using a word like “Form”. It is hardly surprising that Moore had gone through phases of devotion to certain Platonist doctrines before he wrote *Principia Ethica*.

(B) *God, Time and Beauty*

In what follows I shall make two assumptions, but readers are free to substitute partial analogues. (I) The first assumption is that a being who is finite in the ways in which most humans are finite needs to use both temporal and timeless modes of describing and addressing the infinite God who is so different from men. Readers may, if they so choose, change this to the claim that temporal (or timeless) talk about God is literally correct while the other kind of talk about Divine properties is useful, but possibly misleading. (Neither Hartshorne nor neo-Thomists need have the last word.) (II) The second assumption is that God is literally *simple*, but usefully described in something like metaphor as a complex being with a horde of truly distinct and analysably separate properties. These disjoint properties are like Russell’s “Logical Constructions”, such as *sets*. But, on the one hand, Russell tended to work at the logical construction of a single individual from many — as when he derives truths about *the average plumber* from truths about *many* actual ones. On the other hand, the more traditional theologian had better be usually devoted to logically constructing truths about *many* “metaphorical” properties of God from truth about *a single* Divine Nature⁶.

Now turn again to God, Time and Beauty. There seems to be at least one very natural path for a host of Biblical thinkers to take on matters of Beauty and Art. To take this path, we have seen, is to say (*not* literally) that Beauty is one of the almost purely basic properties of God (Ultimate Reality); that we seek to construct logically truths about His Beauty from revelations about his simple nature. Like Lovingness, Moral Completeness, Perfect Knowledge, Perfect Power and (utter) Self-Sufficiency, God’s Beauty is disclosed in a variety of ways to all agents capable of beginning to grasp it. Those ways, things, states and the like, which reveal God’s Beauty, include many natural objects, many divine revelations and human artifacts, many properties and sets, many actual or potential conceptions of minds endowed with more talents than ordinary human minds.

The Biblical interpreter has been found likely to feel the pull of two fundamentally opposed perspectives. There is, *first*, the “pole” of God the Supreme Person, the Supreme Intending Agent, Changer and Creator. When God is so constructed logically, at least, as a perfect but temporal being, then the truly beautiful aspects of God and His creation are the results of His ever intending and ever continuing to maximize the presence of certain supremely valuable properties both in Himself and in

6. I explain and defend this position at length in a paper “Simplicity. Analogy and Plain Religious Lives” which appears at *Faith and Philosophy*, 1, 2, 1984, pp. 216–229. If, however, readers prefer, they may treat the talk of a simple creator as metaphoric, but sometimes useful, and the talk of a complex divine nature as literal and correct.

Creation while it endures. There is, *second*, the more hellenically rooted vision of God as an utterly changeless being without purposes or any future-directed thoughts. God would just eternally exemplify values through what He is and through the Creation whose history He generates in a timeless present. I have changed my mind more than once in my life about the need to give priority to one of these modes of thinking as a human about God. Both views of God now seem necessary to me, as “partial perspectives”, for us to do most justice *both* to the planner or agent of the Bible who appears to change in attitudes towards the chosen people and others, *and* to the unchanging aseity of the Divine in much outstanding theology and mysticism. But, as I have already suggested, those who disagree with this “double” approach, may use both approaches, while treating only one as a source of *literal* truth.

With this religious combination of personal, future-minded agency and transpersonal, immutable properties we may crudely compare in aesthetics a dividing of the roots for Expressionism and Formalism. On the one hand, examples of Beauty found in works of art, natural creations, special states of the mind, and the like can be viewed as the results of there being a personal creator and personal creatures. Some of these personal creatures, human artists, are moved — whether they fully understand or not “what makes them tick” — to do two basic things. They are moved to reflect the supreme quality, Beauty, of God and at the same time to disclose inspiring *relations* between Beauty and many features of being a person. The successful human artist, let us say, creates works of “Art-Beauty” which reflect Beauty and disclose many of Beauty’s relations to what is varied but deep in the personal, human or superhuman. (To be an artist, good or bad, a human must satisfy a few out of many — *not* all-possible criteria for being attracted to Beauty and to manifesting that attraction by changing the world.) In revealing or expressing both Beauty and such relations between the beautiful and personal, a human artist or an artistically creative agent makes it clearer for himself and others what Ultimate Reality and human fulfilment are like.

On the other hand, such a religious believer may add, partial analogues of “Formalism” are also well worth developing if one reflects on Beauty and the arts with attention to historically familiar talk of what lies “under the aspect of a timeless eternity”. A supreme property of God’s perfection, that which we call Beauty and which human creatures may begin to contemplate and properly admire, just *is* instantiated by and in God’s nature. It just is fixedly found in the glory of His creation, in the rich webs of dependences which stretch atemporally before His all-knowing mind ; in the art works of His creatures, and much more. As for this way of considering God and Beauty in terms of the unchanging, let us call it *The Fixed Aesthetic View*.

There can be far more continuity between Beauty in Nature and certain “expressive” kinds of first-rate achievement in the human arts than many Expressionists who simply ignore religions as superstitions would probably like to allow. On the other hand, interest in religions can help Expressionists when trying to straighten out the usual debates on predicates of art works and artists.

What aid does talk of these two religious views provide when we turn to aesthetician’s debates about whether certain words in certain places have univocal,

equivocal or analogical uses? What about “The composer is always *sad*, and his music is always *sad*, and the result is always *sad*.”? The initial answer should be clear enough by now: matters vary a great deal with the occasions of use. “Sad” may be used to mean “pathetic/pitiful/worthless”, in which case there can be many occasions of synonymous uses in the sentence for all three occurrences of “sad”. The first “sad” could be almost equivocal and the next two synonymous when we talk about a depressed composer whose jolly-sounding jigs are technically pathetic and worthless, leading to disastrous results at the box office.

In less curious examples we seem forced to allow for possible equivocity of use between the first and second predicates. For we are hesitant about any apriorist history and psychology of music, which rules that if MM’s composition C almost always evokes feeling F or thesis T, in listeners, then the composer must have been feeling F or believing T when he wrote C; and/or must have been trying to evoke F or belief in T when he wrote C; and/or could not have written C at the time unless at least one of the first two conditions *or* very similar conditions obtained in his mind.

Some, like Tormey, attack Expressionism in good part because they find such apriorism hard to square either with good sense or with known historical facts about composers’ situations when they compared particular pieces. (And so on for the other arts). There could well be some who oppose Expressionism because it does not provide a decision procedure for uses of predicates, or does not produce one that yields consistent results. Someone who represents the Creative View of Aesthetics could comment on such fears like this. “I am careful to distinguish between the supreme and abstract property of God, Beauty, and the ‘Art-Beauty’ of human artists. The secular foes of secular Expressionism do not want to be driven to a forced option between calling everything beautiful either a natural phenomenon *or* a work or performance carefully wrought from deep human feeling. Expression on my view allows for examples of Beauty that are aspects of God’s nature; created things that may seem to be human artifacts, but were made by some other agent, agents or chains of causal factors (personal or impersonal); results of man-made machines designed to go out of human control in numerous ways; results partly of chance, if God wishes to allow chance and randomness in parts of the Creation. Every beautiful, created thing must be ultimately traceable back in time to God’s knowledge, conceptions and creative power. Any property in an art work must be ultimately dependent on God’s thinking about it as a possible property. Every property in an art work has a suitable word in a language understandable by God which is synonymous with other expressions in such a language. It permits the descriptions of causal chains from properties that originally interested God to the present art work. But there is no need to have a theory in human languages for relating all uses of aesthetic and relevant psychological predicates in terms of equivocity, univocity and analogy.”

One who holds the Fixed Aesthetic View would add that from his atemporal standpoint very much the same comments on Expressionism can be made. Where what we call *successful works of human art* are found in Creation, all their properties must be traceable in a Divine language, through some human properties to certain properties of God or properties (that leave us baffled) in God’s thought. Different

systems, almost equally rich theories for explaining relations between human predicates, can be constructed in human language. The theories may be excellent, yet always inadequate for some cases or always in conflict on some cases. The limits of human language and logic for explaining human speech may turn out always to be regrettable among humans. But one should not therefore despair of gaining wisdom with metaphysical reflection.

PART TWO

(I) *Alan Tormey's Naturalism : Some Philosophical Construction*

Compare these Creative and Fixed Aesthetic Views to the stand of a Naturalist opponent of the so-called Expression-Theory of Art like Alan Tormey in his book *The Concept of Expression*. We read, for example, Tormey describing his opponent in words like these :

Expressive properties are those properties of art works (or natural objects) whose names also designated intentional states of persons [...] The only way that we can interpret the notion of art-as-expression which is both coherent and artistically relevant is to construe statements referring to works of art and containing some cognate form of “expression” as references to certain properties of the works themselves⁷.

Complaining that “from the close of the eighteenth century to the present, ‘expression’ and its cognates have dominated both aesthetic theorizing and critical appraisal of the arts”⁸. Tormey notes with special distaste the contentions (i) that “expression must be predicated of both artistic process and product”, and (ii) that “a noncontingent, specifiable relation” must hold “between the artist’s activity and the work of art”; (iii) that something expressed by the artist as he works “is then to be found ‘embodied’, ‘infused’ or ‘objectified’ in the work itself”⁹: Hence the artist must be “engaged in expressing something”¹⁰. Tormey is soon glad to mix description, sarcasm and attack.

According to the theory, Tormey holds, “the expressive qualities of the art work are direct consequence of the expressive act”¹¹. But not just any emotional surge of expression will do. As Dewey classically put it : expression requires first, “urge from within outwards”, then “inner agitation”, then the “shaping of materials in the interest of embodying excitement”, then “the welling up... classified and ordered by taking into itself the values of prior experience”¹². Dewey, Ducass, Collingwood, Santayana, Tolstoy, Véron and others are led by related sorts of Expression Theory to intolerable conflicts : the precepts of the theory have to be confused with alleged evidence for the

7. TORMEY, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. DEWEY, *Art as Experience*, New York, Putnam's, 1934, pp. 61-62.

theory in order to argue for its plausibility, so that contingent and necessary or “organic” relations have to be identified¹³; a contingent, causal relation of expression is rejected for failing to isolate the aesthetic, while the postulated non-contingent relation is never classified enough to warrant the rejection¹⁴; falsifiably contingent and biographical statements about artists’ inner states and intentions are confused with necessary, criterial statements about the expressive qualities of works of art¹⁵; the Expression Theorist may now put under pressure to hold that his position is *analytically* true. But then it would be empty because it is indisputable — as no such philosopher would wish to start trivializing matters by saying¹⁶.

When we move from studying the basis of his Naturalist criticisms (brightened with brief accounts of Wittgenstein) to taking our familiar theist’s double view of God, beauty and art works, Tormey’s attempts to offer universally impressive criticisms turn out to be restricted and parochial at the ontological base. His claims may seem to be metaphysically neutral, but they are only plausible in relation to one narrow set of Naturalist backgrounds. From the standpoint of a Fixed Aesthetic View and of one who knows God more closely “face to face”, it necessarily pertains to God’s essence to be beautiful. A supreme property of God-like Beauty must be richly disclosed throughout His inanimate creation and through His gifted creatures’ productions. What is essentially necessary or is analytic truth as reflective of Ultimate Reality (*per se notum per se*) must, of course, be disclosed in God’s nature and dependent beings. But the essentially necessary or analytic in itself, as Aquinas observed against Anselm, is not to be simply equated with what looks conceptually necessary to limited human thought (*per se notum quoad nos*)¹⁷.

From the Creative Aesthetic View, the majority of effects intended by ourselves as finite persons and agents *must be or must seem* to be realized in that otherwise our very concept of intention may become too obscure and collapse. There *is* a non-contingent link. But intentions often fall short of their ends. And it is possible for failure obviously to overtake a good number of our intentions to create beautiful things or to disclose effectively some relations between the personal, the felt and the beautiful¹⁸. Thus there are grounds from the standpoint of Time for considering numerous relations between numerous intentions and arrivals at the intended effects to be contingent (less than necessarily binding). Accordingly a horde of intended disclosures or relations between (i) the beautiful, the felt and the personal and (ii) what would be relevant fulfilments of the intention remains in fair part a matter of uncertainty. There is no conflict between asserting what the artist meant to do and speaking of his failure to do it. Therefore, holders of the Creative Aesthetic View, since they distinguish *hope for X* from *attainment of X* in some (semantically fragmenting)

13. TORMEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 102-106.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

17. Cf. F.C. COPLESTON, s.j. *History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, p. 56.

18. In God’s case, one of omnipotence, His intentions must be fulfilled unless He can Omnipotently will self-frustration at the last moment.

discussions of *contingency*, not in all, would refuse to conflate contingent and falsifiable assertions of evidence about a creator’s state of mind with essentially necessary [tautological ?] statements about what the art work’s “expressive properties” have to be, if they really are works of a certain kind. The theist’s metaphysical tenets concerning Creative and Fixed Aesthetics do not treat the connection as something to be utterly fixed by human lexicons alone nor as something totally mysterious and unexplained. Sometimes “X really means Y” means “Y ought to be used like X”¹⁹. If we could know how and when certain strings of human words ought to be used (to reflect Ultimate Reality) we would know why something must be set in this way or that. At least, in a Divinely intelligible language the rough equivalents of our Word 1 and Word 2, used for certain purposes in certain places, would stand in particular relations of meaning very clearly.

But more must be stressed about those intriguing words “Contingency” and “Connections” with their large and porous Families of Meanings. For there are religious believers who stress Free Will in art. It may well have so happened that an artist chose at the last possible moment, after dwelling for weeks on thoughts of green and revulsion, to paint this particular work, “*Angry Redneck’s Angry Boil*”, He may well have done so in *red* from a wholly understood urge to reveal something novel about anger and the absurdity of personhood. He may have just suddenly chosen red for disclosure. Perhaps he simply chose *in puncto temporis* to portray anger and personhood and Beauty caught up in a beautiful relationship. Perhaps he later happened *in puncto temporis* to choose brown and to catch almost the same relationship even more impressively in a similar painting “*Angry Brownshirt’s Angry Boil*”. Quite possibly, there is for human purposes a radically contingent (uncertain) tie in the first painting between how much was revealed *about* active anger and how much was revealed *from* active anger. Perhaps there is for humans a radically contingent (surd) tie between his choice of anger and personhood and his choice of red. Perhaps there are for humans radically contingent (theory-defying) ties between his choice of relationship to “express” and his choices of colour, size, time for execution, eventually preferred audience and much else. And performance can have as many kinds of contingency as writing, painting, composing, tattooing and the rest.

“For”, says this religionist in his temporal vein, “this artist is not only a changing changer, an agent in time. He may well be a curiously, but truly *free* contemplator whose choices of ‘medium’ and ‘message’ are almost as unpredictable to himself as to anyone else”. Let “disconnectedness”, like “contingency”, pertain to such matters as predictability, defiance of theories, suddenness of becoming, uncertainty, etc. A high level of disconnectedness in creative liberty is conceptually quite compatible with high degrees of artistically beautiful organization. Therefore, the Creatively Aesthetic View allows for the existence of many masterpieces whose makers have, as they work, a number of the feelings, emotions and intentions which their audiences acquire in seeing, hearing or reading what those makers produce.

19. Compare : “*This is what ‘freedom’ really means/implies/excludes.*”

It allows for the existence of many brutally contingent or “disconnected”-seeming masterpieces. And it insists that there always be in at least one person’s mind, even if in God’s mind alone, a preconception of the feelings, intention and emotions that any work of art may disclose, and may reveal in relation to Beauty and to many features of a possible person. Such a religionist rejects the thesis that no mind need have a preconception of what is expressed in artistic achievements. Tormey’s attack on all Expressionism reads like a modern atheist’s form of Naturalism, not to all possible philosophies and forms of wisdom.

Our believer also dwells on a commitment to expression as disclosure (primarily of certain kinds of relations) in his philosophy of art²⁰. Finally, he emphasized the richness of contingent and non-contingent kinds of relationship between artists’ and Nature’s contributions to revealing Beauty. Tormey’s Naturalism appears somehow to veil this richness and the accompanying differences.

What of a believer who also speaks from a Fixed Aesthetic View? He could explain: “In a comprehensive form of theology for human beings, Expressionism and Formalism are far closer to being complementary, not hopelessly opposed, than Tormey’s Naturalism can let us realize. Beauty should be complementarily seen as a major, unchanging property of an immutable God: it is, also, a timeless property of elements, qualities and relations found in the four-dimensional manifold of Creation as known by its Maker²¹. The Beauty of natural phenomena in Creation and of created people’s art and performances turns on what is linked by what in timeless chains of dependence. The focus here is on tenseless statements about the property of Beauty, its cosmic distribution in forms of dependence or independence. Beauty is considered as a precious and all but unanalyzable property. The temporal focus of Creative Aesthetics is centred far more on the truth or falsity of tensed statements about certain relations between Beauty, persons and products. Such a combination of tensed and tenseless truth, rather than Tormey’s self-restriction and rival dichotomists’ gesturings at forced options, teaches us far more about Art and Nature”.

PART THREE

Roger Shiner’s Naturalism: “The Mental Life of a Work of Art”

Shiner’s strikingly entitled essay first appeared in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*²². While Tormey’s philosophy of art is more obviously usable as a weapon against secular Expressionists and religionists with a Creative View of Aesthetics, Shiner’s Naturalism is also just as quickly seen as something for scourging secular Formalism and the Fixed Aesthetic View of those who worship. Shiner has

20. To know what one wishes to do — in some senses of the phrase — need not be to know the correct analysis of what one intends to achieve *in toto*.

21. Compare BOETHIUS’ *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V. This manifold lies spread out atemporally before the omniscient Divine Mind.

22. XLI, 3 (1982), pp. 253–268.

much of interest to offer concerning Univocity, but a fair amount of this ground has been touched upon already. I wish to concentrate on a few central points about what is a more recent and more Wittgensteinian discussion than Tormey's.

According to Shiner, the insights of Wittgenstein have now made all too obvious the sheer unintelligibility of all “thinking” like the dualism of many theists in their approach to Beauty, art and expression which I described in Section One. Moreover, any form of what Shiner relatedly calls *Cartesian* dualism must now be denied acceptance in aestheticians' rational discourse. For after Wittgenstein's reflections on criteria and meaning, we simply cannot talk philosophically of ontological commitment to minds — to distinctively non-physical, spiritual entities.

Minds, we learn, are taken by Cartesians to bind together their mysteriously connected, but distinctively live physical objects (*bodies*) of flesh and bone. And minds are also held to affect in turn distinctively inanimate bits and pieces of the world. The latter would include pages, words, keyboards, stains, canvasses, clay or marble chunks, puppets, etc. Nor are we allowed to take seriously the idea of souls affecting body-soul compounds. Such would be some religious believers' ideas of conductors and directors that next affect *artistically active* body-soul compounds like symphony players, mummies, comedians, group weavers and ballerinas. According to Wittgenstein, one recalls; “the inner process stands in need of outer criteria”. Thus any supposed assertion about minds that are separate from observable bodies and that unobservably act upon animate or inanimate bodies, or upon live body-soul compounds, is just a supposed assertion lacking in criteria for checking its own truth. Hence it is unintelligible. Both Expressionism and Formalism, we are told, depend on shady dealings in Dualism and must be cast out.

Comments on Shiner: Stuart Hampshire and others have remarked that emphatic talk of dualism in connection with Descartes' dualism is, when heard against the background of the intelligible history of human ideas, often bizarre. Let me add the (actually) obvious, if neglected. Long before Descartes, serious religions and philosophies produced “split”, “interactionist” ontologies, hard to police with outer criteria. For a grasp of possible ontological divisions and causal relations between refined matter and much more consistently observable gross matter is needed to follow Homer on the crucial differences between gods, animals, stones, live men with normal bodies, and human souls that become like shadowy bats for eternity in Hades, etc. Ideas in the Presocratics and Plato suggest that comprehending several mixed ontologies will require one to show understanding of individuals and causal relations between them in touching on some member of a set like the Following. Take the set: unobservable and observable atomic and molecular objects like natural *bodies* and *chunks*, material *stuff* like, *fire, dust, fog, smoke*, abstract *forces* like Eros or War or Mind, unchanging abstract *entities* like ratios, numbers and geometrical figures, values, ideal types, etc.; *changing* non-material entities like souls which can *know* such unchanging abstract entities and forces, while physical organs cannot, etc. Some forms of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism appear to introduce deep trichotomies with an unchanging Supreme Being (spiritual and personal, or non-personal), and changing and changed dependent spiritus, changed and changing matter-or-illusion.

How some of these “things” can all be said to *be* or to *interact* in a criteriologically satisfying way may be harder to tell than the history of repeated sets of human ideas will allow. Moderns like Wittgenstein or Shiner want to have it both ways. They want to dismiss as nonsense many basic human modes of thinking in history about the world, *yet* they want to pose as the champions of cultures who take all Forms of Life seriously. As Feyerabend and others suggest, they want to reject high theorizing about language, but to speak with the highest authority of scientific theorizers.

One might next give Shiner the benefit of a twist to Tormey’s attacks on Dewey and other Expressionist thinkers. Tormey rightly insists that the tenets of a philosophical stance on an issue must not turn out to be identical or polemically identified with the *evidence* or the *arguments* for the theory. I would add that an attack on Dualism as unintelligible must not turn out to be largely based on premises (couched in neo-Wittgensteinian sermonizing) to the effect that Cartesianism or Mind-Body Dualism is unintelligible. Nor must the question be begged that public criteria are only needed for mind-body dualism, not for all radical forms of “split” — ontology, involving categorical interactions.

Our Creative and Fixed Aestheticians might offer this final comment: “A mode of doing aesthetics which consigns a great part of man’s spiritual, intellectual and cultural history to the rubbish bin carries too great a risk of destroying truth, wisdom, freedom, openness to discovery and much else. The probability of the authoritarian exclusivist being in part seriously mistaken is too great in view of human performances in so many areas. The ‘negative’ utility of gambling against civilized thinking and being mistaken is too high. The claims of the Principle of Preserving Some Cultural Continuity are too great. Let us not try to dissolve the Eternal.”

These samples from Tormey’s classic book *The Concept of Expression* and from Shiner’s more recent “The Mental Life of a Work of Art” should suffice for the purpose of reintroducing and indicating how to uphold this linked pair of religious approaches to Beauty, aesthetics and expression. They should suffice also to initiate more concern for the multiplicity of standpoints accessible to religious philosophies and cultures — also for open-minded, cross-cultural reflection.

Having spent this much time on the high places of theology and the term “expression”, I ask the reader’s leave to conclude with an approach for flexible believers and other open-minded friends of metaphysics to making sense of the adjective “expressive”. I mean making sense of it *more practically* and *simply* in relation to religious aspirations. I shall be talking about “expressive” for religious purposes, but not very directly about the Expression Theory of Art for religious purposes.

PART FOUR

“EXPRESSIVE” — I

“Expressive”, Ideology and Practical Analysis

Consider a spokesman for a group with a common ideology who wants at times to talk about the arts with very different members of his pluralist society. A Jesuit ballet

critic intends to discuss with a brilliant, but rigid Dialectical Materialist from the Bulgarian Embassy the comparative merits of a Montreal company’s and a Kiev company’s recent sets for Swan Lake. An Orthodox rabbi aims to discuss certain psalms with a broadly mixed literary club of suburban housewives. One useful way of dealing with some aesthetic terms whose Sense and Reference may vary in part from one ideological group to another is what I shall call the *building block approach*.

Descriptive and Prescriptive Analyses in Relation to a View

First, consider rapidly a building block account of how “miracle” or “miraculous” may be intelligently used either in the Canadian *mélange* of peoples or in the American melting pot. (i) *P*: To call an event a miracle in a purely *Psychological* way is to call it evocative of amazement, wonder, dread, awe, delight or astonishment, or likely to affect a human being in such ways. (ii) *N*: To call an event a miracle in a *Psychological and Normative* way is to say it can, does and *ought to* evoke such amazement and wonder. (iii) *E*: To call an event a miracle is to say it is *Extraordinarily, Most Unusually* likely to evoke wonder and deservedly so. (iv) *S*: To call an event a miracle is to say that it is a (special) *Sign* of some crucial truth, as well as being an event that generally evokes and ought to evoke an extraordinary degree of wonder from humans and any other potentially rational beings. (iva) *I.S.*: It may be an *Indefinite Sign* simply pointing, as for the young Prince Siddartha, to a need for one to give up much that one enjoys and seek truth. (ivb) *D.S.*: It may be a *Definite Sign* pointing to the rightness of some particular path or way, secular or religious. (ivc) *D. TL.S.*: It may be a *Definite Theological Sign* calling the witness to follow the event’s associated call from the Biblical God or the God of some other theist’s life.

For an ideologue to disambiguate uses of “masterpiece” or “artistic masterpiece”, allowing for its most popular uses, for overlapping popular and ideological habits, and also for his fellow ideologists’ special handling of the term, the building block method proposed for “miracle” seems to work simply and well. A work of plastic art, literature or music can be assigned a power to move a normal, sensitive person *psychologically*. It can then be added that the work *deserves* to move them in the direction of better grasping relations between Beauty and being a person/*or* between Beauty, being a person and having some Emotion or Intention of or Beauty itself; that it can so move them and deserves to move them to an *extraordinary* degree — and so on up to the claim that this work of art is a (special) *Sign* of what constitutes ultimate reality and its demands on humans.

PART FIVE

“EXPRESSIVE” — II

Expressive and Its Building Blocks

When one comes to the still more controversial term “expressive” one finds a number of aestheticians divided between various rival “positions”. Recall two out of this multitude. *First*, some call a work of art *expressive* because the human artist has a

strong feeling or emotion which he or she sometimes communicates to his or her viewers, listeners or readers by virtue of the way he or she creates an *opus aestheticum*. *Second*, some call a work of art *expressive* solely by virtue of certain “formal properties” of the art-work itself, whatever the human creator’s intentions. But the theist may be convinced that the wrong metaphysical slant has anthropocentrized and secularized such talk of such a term.

For the medieval and similarly minded modern theist the “natural world” or “Second Book”, as opposed to the realm of human composition, is the creation of a personal agent, an infinitely creative Artificer. The areas and features of the realm of Nature can be just as literally expressive as human works of art. For some Humanists and deists of the French Enlightenment, and for some modern Marxists a particularly striking mountain scene could constitute a Definite Sign that man’s forthcoming scientific *domination* of Nature’s beauties will make humans’ thoughts, societies and creations far more beautiful, as well. *On the other hand*, even in the case of a human person’s picture, book, film, music, play, opera, ballet, sculpture and the like, the “representational” or “abstract” art work may be *expressive* to the theist of God’s calling men and women to fulfilment; *expressive* to a Buddhist of some Sutra’s thoughts on the joys awaiting those no longer enslaved by Maya.

Let us try to get at some of the combinable *Psychological* features of what is “expressive” in Art and in Nature.

There are theists who want to *begin* the analysis of “miracle” by suggesting as its ever best and uniquely best synonymous term something like “act of Divine intervention in the Natural Realm”. This excludes the vital overlap between secular and religious usage — an overlap which may become an invaluable path from Fact to Faith in preaching and meditation. Some want to start by freezing the idea of what is expressive in rigid terms of one or another human artist’s being an *expressor* of some human emotion or idea as *the thing to be expressed*, and also of some artistic creation (or feature of it) as *the thing to be expressed or the expressor*.

Let me start, instead, by placing “expressive” among a number of very rough synonyms which serve as truth-preserving substitutions within sentences for some, but certainly not all contexts. What is *expressive* of X, may be *indicative* of X or X’s relations to Y and Z; *demonstrative* of X or X’s relations to Y and Z and A, etc.; *depictive* of X, *explicative* of X, *representative* of X, *suggestive* of X, *descriptive*, *contributive*, *disclusive*, *adumbrative*, *imitative*, *instructive about*, *debunkative about*; *intuitively revealing*; *constructive*, *reminiscent*, *revelatory*, etc.

Speaking, then, of the building-block for the ground-level in a secular-to-ideological analysis of “expressive”, let me say that what is *expressive* of X from a *Psychological* starting part is something of this sort. It is something which can and often does *cause a duly informed and sensitive person to know, or understand, or realize, or become more aware of what X is like; what X is related and how; what how it feels to be or have X; why people or other organisms seek or flee X, or like being X, or having X, or lacking X; whom to expose to X or protect from X; why X has the properties or effects it does have, when and where X is good and when X is bad; how X is more precious or defiling them anything else; how very good or horribly sad and evil*

the world or the community or the industrial would be with or without X, with more or less X — and so on in a similar vein for a large cluster of associated results.

At the level of the *Psychological* and the *Normative*, something is expressive of X if it has such psychological powers and effects regarding persons' capacity for insight, knowledge of relations, understanding, awareness, etc. It is expressive, also, only if that something clearly *ought* to have such powers and effects because of what is shown about the beautiful, the beautiful and the personal, and so on. Speaking at the level of the *Extraordinary*, combined with the building-blocks of the *Psychological* and the *Normative*, one says that something expressive is quite unusually or extraordinarily worthy to evoke or increase knowledge, awareness and understanding of certain precious “things” implicit in, or related to or other than the object itself. As for the roles of “expressive” to indicate a *Sign*, something expressive may point indefinitely for the witness to the need for some fundamental change in his vision and values, or definitely to the inspiring and partly imitable example of someone's life. For the Biblical theist a work of art may definitely and theologically express some message from God to this potentially rational creature — a message through the artist as his vessel or messenger. For many a primitive animist a tree's exquisite leaves or a cousin's exquisite carving may express in connection with Beauty a warning or a blessing from the ruling spirits of his tribe.

PART SIX

“Expressive”, Some Possible Examples

I owe it to the reader to put, at least briefly, some kind of aesthetic flesh on these conceptual bones. To do this, let me select an ideological group. In Scotland and England, let me say, there are Presbyterians and Anglicans who feel a special warmth for each other, as well as a special reverence for authors on both sides in the conflict of Cavaliers and Roundheads. There is a shared sense of awe, let me add, for the influence of Calvin on architecture, glass, music, clothing and, especially, literature.

What if one asked a dourly representative member of such a quasi-Calvinist group (or a neo-Jansenist group) for an example of some Seventeenth Century creation that was *expressive* and a *masterpiece*, but purely at the *psychological level*? One might easily get the example of Merrick's sensual, almost Catullan and frankly pagan “Corinna's Going A-Maying”. Compare these lines to Catullus' “Nox est perpetua una dormienda”.

So when you and I are made
 A fable, song or fleeting shade,
 All love, all liking, all delight
 Lies drowned with us in endless night²³.

23. 65-68.

For a severe, but cultivated and sensitive Calvinist such lines could be acknowledged as having immense psychological charm, or as being part of a pagan masterpiece — but showing no merit to receive wide attention. Again, he would find the lines movingly expressive of a pagan's concept of death. Yet no further building blocks would be needed.

Two lines from W.B. Yeats' "The Second Coming" next appear to such a modern Calvinist's mind. The author is not even a theist, let alone Christian, but a good number of severely Calvinist readers of today might agree that here these lines 3 and 4 constitute a miraculously expressive point, a masterpiece when taken on their own — something which (*normatively speaking*) *ought* to move and inspire the reader because of the poet's power to link God, Beauty and persons, as well as to evoke contemporary and prophetic insight. Perhaps the poet acts as a prophet *malgré lui*:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,/ More anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Tastes and evaluations will vary among my chosen ideologists, but I suspect that even Milton and Bunyan would acknowledge the *extraordinary* power of lines 25–30 in T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* to move people's hearts, to *express* the horror of a godless world-view, to convey what *ought* to be conveyed:

... Only/ There is shadow under this red rock/ (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),/ And I will show you something different from either/ Your shadow at morning striding behind you/ Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;/ I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The last three quotations reveal how some such Christians who nurture suspicions against non-Christian or too hiddenly Christian works of art might rise from the *Psychological* to the *Normative*, to the *Extraordinary* levels of appraisal. What then of the *Sign*-levels? We mean, as before, the levels of *Indefinite Signs*, *Definite Signs* and *Theologically Definite Signs*.

Indefinite Signs. Wordsworth's haunting, but tempting notes of what is alleged to be pantheism in *Tintern Abbey* lead him to forge many lines which a Christian might find deservedly and extraordinarily moving. Verses 88 to 91 are expressive of a deep love for nature. They seem to offer to contented believers an Indefinite Sign which calls upon them to make some unspecified but fundamental changes in their lives:

For I have learned/ To look on nature, not as in the hour/ Of thoughtless youth;/ but hearing often times/ The still sad music of humanity.

Definite Signs. George Herbert likens the rebirth of nature to his own release from spiritual barrenness in "The Flaw", notably at lines 36–42:

And now in age I bud again/ After so many deaths I live and write;/ I once more smell the dew and rain/ And relish versing: be my only light,/ It cannot be/ That I am he/ But when thy tempests fell all night.

Compare the last stanza of Charles Baudelaire's *L'albatros* with its high musical excellence employed to express a tragically definite sign about a good poet's role in this life:

Le poète est semblable au prince des nuées,/ Qui hante la tempête et se rit de
l’archer,/ Exilé au sol, au milieu des huées,/ Ses ailes de géant l’empêchent de
marcher.

Baudelaire, a profoundly Catholic poet for all the devilish masks of his *Les Fleurs du Mal*, builds *L’albatros* up to creating a definite, indignant sign of poets’ oppression by those who do not understand either art or religion.

For a *Definite Theological Sign* that endows an expressive masterpiece, consider William Blake’s introduction to *Songs of Experience* :

Hear the voice of the Bard !/ Who Present, Past and Future, sees ;/ Whose ears
have heard/ The Holy Word/ That walked among the ancient trees/ Calling the
lapsed Soul,/ And weeping in the evening dew ;/ That might control/ The Starry
pole/ And fallen, fallen light renew.

Let me close this part of my essay with a stanza from the Bible that I take to be about the most *Definitely Theological Sign* one could get. For here Amos speaks what he takes to be God’s own message :

I hate, I despise your feasts,/ and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies./
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings,/ I will not
accept them,/ and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts/ I will not look upon./
Take away from me the noise of your songs ;/ to the melody of your harps I will
not listen./ But let justice roll down like waters,/ and righteousness like an/ ever-
flowing stream²⁴.

PART SEVEN

Concluding Remarks

In Part One I presented a Christian’s double view of how believers may think of God’s and man’s relations to Beauty, the Arts and some ways of talking about Expression. The prescriptive account of how, perhaps, believers ought to talk about such matters left some credit in the account of both Expressionist and Formalist traditions in aesthetics. The idea of disclosing many forms of beauty itself in a timeless present (or “*sub specie aeternitatis*”) was contrasted with the temporal role of agents who reveal relations between the beautiful, the personal and persons’ emotions or intentions. If I am right in concluding that Biblical writings encourage us more to think of God as a temporal being, while several great theologians and mystics seem more to suggest an eternity without any change, then the two views recommended for combining in meditations complement one another well both in keeping with the history of aesthetics in recent centuries and in keeping with two basic approaches to God in the Biblical tradition.

In Part Two I dwelt upon these Christian paradigms’ relevance to answering questions about Beauty and Art more wisely by setting them, where possible, in the framework of differing religions, philosophies, ideologies and cultures which appeal

24. 5, 21–24.

to what is best in the human spirit. I next went on to try giving some exegesis and, also, chastisement to those like Tormey and Shiner who wish to dismiss proposals about Expression, if they do not fit a rather narrow, even arbitrary form of Naturalism like their own preferred kinds. I argue that openness to rival systems of culture, religion and categories cannot be consistently or rationally ended for the sake of some overly parochial paradigm of reasoning. The arguments appear to support the legitimacy of prescriptive analysis of Art and Expression offered by Christians and other ontological explorers during Part One and in the opening of Part Two.

Part Three tenders a more modest form of analysis which may enable diverse Christians to communicate more easily about the *Expressive* in Beauty and Art — both with one another and with cooperative followers of many ideological paths. The form of analysis is more simple and practical than the approach of Part One to *Expression*. But the more speculative treatment of “Expression” and the more down-to-earth method applied more pluralistically in Part Three will, I hope, complement one another for those who find such questions as perplexing as I must admit, alas, that I do.